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EL SALVADOR AND NICARAGUA, 1977-1980:
UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

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The triumph of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua during July 1979, completed the first successful guerrilla revolution in Latin America since Castro's victory in Cuba twenty years earlier. By March 1980, another such revolution had gotten under way in El Salvador. These revolutions posed important policy concerns for President Jimmy Carter.

1977: THE SETTING

During 1977 President Carter firmly committed the United States to work toward a order that respected individual human rights and responded to human aspirations. El Salvador and Nicaragua posed situations that demonstrated the complexities involved in implementing human-rights policy. El Salvador, the most densely populated country in Central America, was a logical setting for unrest. The highly imbalanced distribution of income, wealth, and land characterized the export-oriented economy. Nearly a third of the work force was unemployed. For over forty years, the Somoza family and its National Guard had ruled Nicaragua. The Somozas concentrated much of the country's land and productive capacity in their own hands. By the late 1970's broad-based opposition groups challenged the rulers of both countries.

On May 3 United States Representative to the United Nations Andrew Young stated the Administration's basic policy in an address before a session of the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America.

There is at this moment, waiting to be born, a new synthesis of two powerful ideas the integration of the concepts of social justice and economic development into a single vision of historical process. . . . We must unite the concept of development (which usually means economic growth) with the concept of liberation (which usually means freedom from oppression, poverty, dependence, and degradation). (Doc. 1)

During 1977, the United States support for economic growth with social justice in El Salvador and in Nicaragua became manifest in three main areas: economic cooperation, dispute settlement, and human rights.

The Carter administration fostered the concept of regional economic cooperation, structuring assistance programs along regional lines and stressing integration through the Central American common Market, an organization launched in the early 1960s. At a meeting in Washington with President Carter on September 8 El Salvador's President, Carlos Humberto Romero Mena, informed President Carter that the Congress

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

2

had voted to accept the agreement signed in 1976 at Washington that provided for mediation of the border disputes. At the same meeting, President Romero told Carter of his request that a commission on human rights from the United Nations or the Organization of American States go to El Salvador to view progress there. Earlier that year, the Carter administration cited human rights violations in Nicaragua and El Salvador as a factor that restricted military aid to both countries.

1978: NICARAGUA IN CRISIS

Diplomatic pressure did not force Somoza to improve his human-rights record. On January 10, 1978, the most widely-known opposition leader was assassinated, the moderate Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of La Prensa. This act led to a nationwide strike. Religious, civic, and business leaders, political organizations, and the Sandinistas supported the strike, which lasted for two weeks. During the protests, the National Guard, reinforced by tanks, battled armed civilians. Somoza sought to maintain power, despite calls for his resignation. By March conditions verged on civil war.

Commenting on the violence in Nicaragua during a visit to Caracas, President Carter offered a plan to deal with the situation:

...a delegation from the United Nations or the OAS should be welcomed into Nicaragua, and other countries where human rights are threatened, to provide the facts to the outside world. We have a policy in our country, which I am insistent in maintaining, of not intervening in the internal affairs of other nations. But we have a right to express our own selves forcefully and also to encourage action on the part of the United Nations and OAS in going into countries to determine the facts. (Doc. 2)

Support for Somoza was impossible, given the U.S. commitment to human rights; the Administration threw its weight behind a process of mediation.

In September, a massive uprising occurred in Nicaragua, and Somoza declared martial law. From September to December 1978, the United States played a major role in a mediation aimed at arranging the resignation of Somoza.

On September 21, before the meeting of consultation of the foreign ministers of the OAS countries, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher urged that the OAS support humanitarian relief to the people of Nicaragua

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who have been affected by the fighting of the past several weeks and, as may be necessary, to the Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica; support the mandate of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and urge that it investigate forthwith the allegations of serious violations in Nicaragua; support and extend the mandate of the factfinding mission in an effort to keep further violence from spilling across international borders; and urge the Government of Nicaragua and the opposition groups that have called for international conciliation to accept an offer of good offices to help find an enduring and democratic solution. (Doc. 3)

A few days later Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, speaking to the General Assembly of the United Nations reaffirmed the United States' determination to find a peaceful solution.

In this Hemisphere, we must respond to the agony of those caught up in the violence and bloodshed of Nicaragua. We and several countries in Latin America have offered to assist in the mediation of Nicaragua's internal crises.

It is our hope and expectation that all parties concerned will accept these offers and agree to a fair mediation process in which all can have confidence. Only a democratic solution in Nicaragua-- not repression or violence -- can lead to an enduring stability and true peace. (Doc. 4)

The Administration thus indicated that it favored replacement of Somoza by means of a moderate solution, perhaps a national plebiscite. On September 30 Somoza accepted an International Mediation Group that included representatives of the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and the United States. On October 2 Carter appointed Ambassador William G. Bowdler to the Group. Meanwhile, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission investigated alleged abuses and on November 17 issued a unanimous condemnation of the regime.

Early in December the conciliation attempt seemed likely to produce results. On December 6, Somoza agreed to lift the decree of martial law, to grant amnesty to political prisoners, and to relax censorship. The next day Carter remarked to the Members of the White House Correspondents Association:

We're making some progress, I think, in Nicaragua. . . to get Somoza for the first time even to agree to an outside arbitration group to resolve the differences

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between himself and his political adversaries in Nicaragua, to stop the violence, to restrain the shipment of arms into Nicaragua to both sides, and to provide peace between Nicaragua and her immediate neighbors. . . . we have helped to shift the Nicaraguan circumstance from active and massive bloodshed and violence into a negotiation on the details of a democratic plebiscite, that would be monitored by the United Nations or by the OAS, that would decide on the future government of Nicaragua. (Doc. 5)

Shortly thereafter the opposition agreed to the Mediation Group's proposal for an national plebiscite sponsored by the OAS.

1979: REVOLUTION TRIUMPHS

On January 18 Somoza rejected the plebiscite. In response, the United States announced the end of military ties and some economic aid. On that occasion the State Department spokesman, Hodding Carter, said that the three-nation negotiating team "concluded that it cannot break the impasse between the opposition and the Nicaraguan Government caused by President Somoza's unwillingness to accept the essential elements of the mediators' most recent proposal." (Doc. 6)

The United States would take certain steps:

First, the United States is withdrawing the U.S. military assistance group in Nicaragua, and it is terminating our military assistance program which has, in fact, been suspended for some months.

Second, with respect to economic assistance, those Agency for International Development projects which are well-advanced will continue since they are aimed at the basic human needs of the poor. . . . However, no new projects with the government will be considered under present conditions. . . .

Third, we are withdrawing all Peace Corps volunteers from Nicaragua.

Fourth, we are also reducing the number of U.S. Government officials at our embassy in Managua. (Doc. 6)

Thereafter, full-scale fighting broke out; by May civil war paralyzed the nation. Mexico then broke diplomatic relations with the Somoza regime. On June 17 the signatories of the Andean Pact declared Nicaragua to be in a state of war and described the Sandinistas as "legitimate combatants" seeking to establish representative democracy and justice. On the same date the rebels named a five-man junta to serve

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

5

as a government-in-exile.

On June 21 Secretary Vance suggested a peace proposal to the Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the OAS:

- Formation of an interim government of national reconciliation acceptable to all major elements of the society;

- The dispatch by this meeting of a special delegation to Nicaragua;

- A cessation of arms shipments;

- A cease fire;

- An OAS peacekeeping presence to help establish a climate of peace and security and to assist the interim government in establishing its authority and beginning the task of reconstruction; and

- A major international relief and reconstruction effort. (Doc. 7)

Although the meeting rejected the proposal of the United States to send a peacekeeping force to Nicaragua, it passed a resolution (II) on September 23 that called for a democratic government to replace the Somoza regime immediately.

After the OAS meeting, the United States began to deal directly with the government-in-exile. On June 27 Ambassador William Bowdler met rebel leaders, and he maintained contacts while the Provisional Government of National Reconstruction formed a Cabinet. On July 17, Somoza resigned. A week later the Junta and the United States agreed to continue diplomatic relations.

On July 25, President Carter commented on the major elements of United States policy towards Nicaragua during the revolution:

It's a mistake for Americans to assume or to claim that every time an evolutionary change takes place, or even an abrupt change takes place in this hemisphere, that somehow it's the result of secret, massive Cuban intervention. The fact in Nicaragua is that the incumbent government, the Somoza regime, lost the confidence of the Nicaraguan people. There was a broad range of forces assembled to replace Somoza and his regime as the head of the Nicaraguan Government.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

6

We worked as closely as we could without intervening in the internal affairs of Nicaragua with the neighboring countries and with the so-called Andean Group in the northern part of South America to bring about an orderly transition. Our effort was to let the people of Nicaragua ultimately make a decision on who should be their leader, what form of government they should have. We also wanted to minimize bloodshed and to restore stability. That is presently being done. We have a good relationship with the new government. We hope to improve it. We are providing some minimum humanitarian aid for the people of Nicaragua, who've suffered so much.

I think that our posture in Nicaragua is a proper one. I do not attribute at all the change in Nicaragua to Cuba. I think the people of Nicaragua have got enough judgment to make their own decisions, and we will use our efforts in a proper fashion without interventionism, to let the Nicaraguans let their voice be heard in shaping their own affairs. (Doc. 8)

After the change of governments the United States maintained its presence and helped with reconstruction. A proposal soon went to Congress asking for reprogramming of \$18.5 million in foreign assistance from the budget for FY 1979. Speaking before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the House Appropriations Committee on September 11, 1979, Deputy Secretary Christopher explained the basic tenets of United States policy:

--To develop a positive relationship with the new government in Nicaragua based on the principles of nonintervention, equality, and mutual respect.

--To support the development of a democratic, pluralistic government in Nicaragua, by maintaining contact with all elements of Nicaraguan society, including the church, the media, and the private sector, as well as public officials;

--To cooperate with other nations and public and private institutions in assisting Nicaragua's economic recovery; and

--To help directly with the reconstruction effort by interim aid such as we are proposing today and by assessing and seeking to assist in the longer term effort. (Doc. 9)

He warned that "the moderate outcome we seek will not come

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

7

about if we walk away now. Precisely because others are assisting Nicaragua and may seek to exploit the situation there, we must not turn our backs."

In November, the Administration sent a \$75 million supplementary aid request to Congress.

1980: EL SALVADOR IN CRISIS

During 1978 and 1979, the Administration dealt primarily with Nicaragua, but it continued to monitor the situation in El Salvador. On May 4, 1979, members of El Salvador's Popular Revolutionary Bloc occupied the French and Costa Rican embassies and San Salvador Cathedral and took hostages. Police attacked Bloc sympathizers outside San Salvador Cathedral and on May 8 killed at least twentythree persons. Violence continued throughout May. Speaking before the International University in Miami on May 18, the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Patricia Derian, registered the Administration's concern:

El Salvador is another country where we continue to receive credible reports that serious human rights abuses persist. The recent violence at the national cathedral in San Salvador is a particularly shocking instance of this situation. These problems have affected out bilateral relations, and we will continue to urge the Salvadoran Government to restore effective safeguards for human rights. We welcomed the repeal this February of the Law of Public Order, which had given rise to numerous domestic and international criticisms of Salvador's human rights practices. (Doc. 10)

Despite intermittent guerrilla activity throughout 1979, a tiny oligarcy of families monopolized the land and businesses, controlled the government, and maintained power. When the Romero administration proposed reforms, the United States encouraged the effort. Before the subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on September 11, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Viron Vaky, stated:

Putting an end to human rights violations of the integrity of the person is crucial to the overall atmosphere in the country. We believe the establishment of a real and credible electoral process, leading to free municipal/legislative elections in March 1980, is crucial to El Salvador's peaceful evolution and to arresting the critical polarization and frustration that can lead almost certainly to violent confrontation between right and left. . . . We will support real

UNCLASSIFIED

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8

and serious reform with appropriate cooperation and assistance. (Doc. 11)

Romero's steps however, were too little and too late. On October 15, 1979, young military officers broke with the regime, ousted Romero, and joined with moderate civilian leaders to form a Revolutionary Junta of government. The Junta granted amnesty to some political prisoners and committed itself to a platform of social and economic reforms, respect for human rights, and democratic elections. It decreed the abolition of Orden, a rural militia that had terrorized the country side on behalf of previous military regimes.

Since January 1980, the Junta has begun to implement a series of structural reforms. Among them is expropriation of some two million acres of El Salvador's best farmland. This land is to be given to peasants as small private farms or larger cooperatives. Another change involves transfer of 51 percent of local bank stock to the government. The remaining shares to be sold to bank employees and the public.

The United States demonstrated support of the Junta's reforms through pledges of economic aid. It promised \$50 million for FY 1980 to support the agrarian reform and other programs directly beneficial to the poor. It also extended military assistance of \$5.7 million in foreign military sales credits to allow purchases of communication and transportation equipment intended to protect the reform program against violence from both the right and left.

The Department of State spokesman, Hodding Carter referred to the assistance program on February 19:

We support the Revolutionary Governing Junta's desire to carry out basic reforms that will give all the people of El Salvador a more adequate share in the wealth of the country. . . . The security assistance program currently under consideration for El Salvador, will contribute to this goal. . . . The United States has no plans to involve United States forces in a counter-insurgency program of assistance, nor does the program . . . involve sending United States military advisors to that country. (Doc. 12)

The Junta's reform program did not stem the slide toward civil war. Nearly 700 deaths have been reported since 1980. Popular organizations and guerrillas appear to be unifying their forces. Meanwhile, the extreme right is developing a civilian army. Cubans are active in the area. The recent assassinations of El Salvador's Archbishop, Oscar Romero, and the leftist leader, Juan Chacon of the

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Popular Revolutionary Bloc, may solidify opposition in the same way as the death of Chamorro, and polarize the nation.

The United States supported the Junta because it appears to be capable of providing an effective buffer between the extreme right and extreme left.

CONCLUSION

The Carter Administration displayed willingness to tolerate left-nationalist elements in both Nicaragua and El Salvador and to deal with them when negotiations appeared to be in the national interest. The Administration's human-rights policy encouraged political opposition in both countries.

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10

List of Documents

1. U.S. Representative to the United Nations Andrew Young, Statement before the 17th Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, Guatemala City, May 3, 1977.
2. President Jimmy Carter, Press Conference, Caracas, Venezuela, March 28, 1978.
3. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Statement before the Meeting of Consultation of the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of American States, Washington, September 21, 1978.
4. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Statement before the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 29, 1978.
5. President Jimmy Carter, remarks and a Question-and Answer Session with Members of the White House Correspondents Association, Washington, December 7, 1978.
6. Department of State Spokesman Hodding Carter III, Response to a Question at the Daily Press Briefing, Washington, February 8, 1979.
7. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Statement before the Meeting of the Organization of American States, Washington, September 21, 1979.
8. President Jimmy Carter, Press Conference, Washington, July 25, 1979.
9. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Statement before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the House Appropriations Committee, Washington, September 11, 1979.
10. Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Patricia M. Derian, Statement before the Florida International University, Miami, Florida, May 18, 1979.
11. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, September 11, 1979.
12. Department of State Spokesman Hodding Carter III, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, February 19, 1980.

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